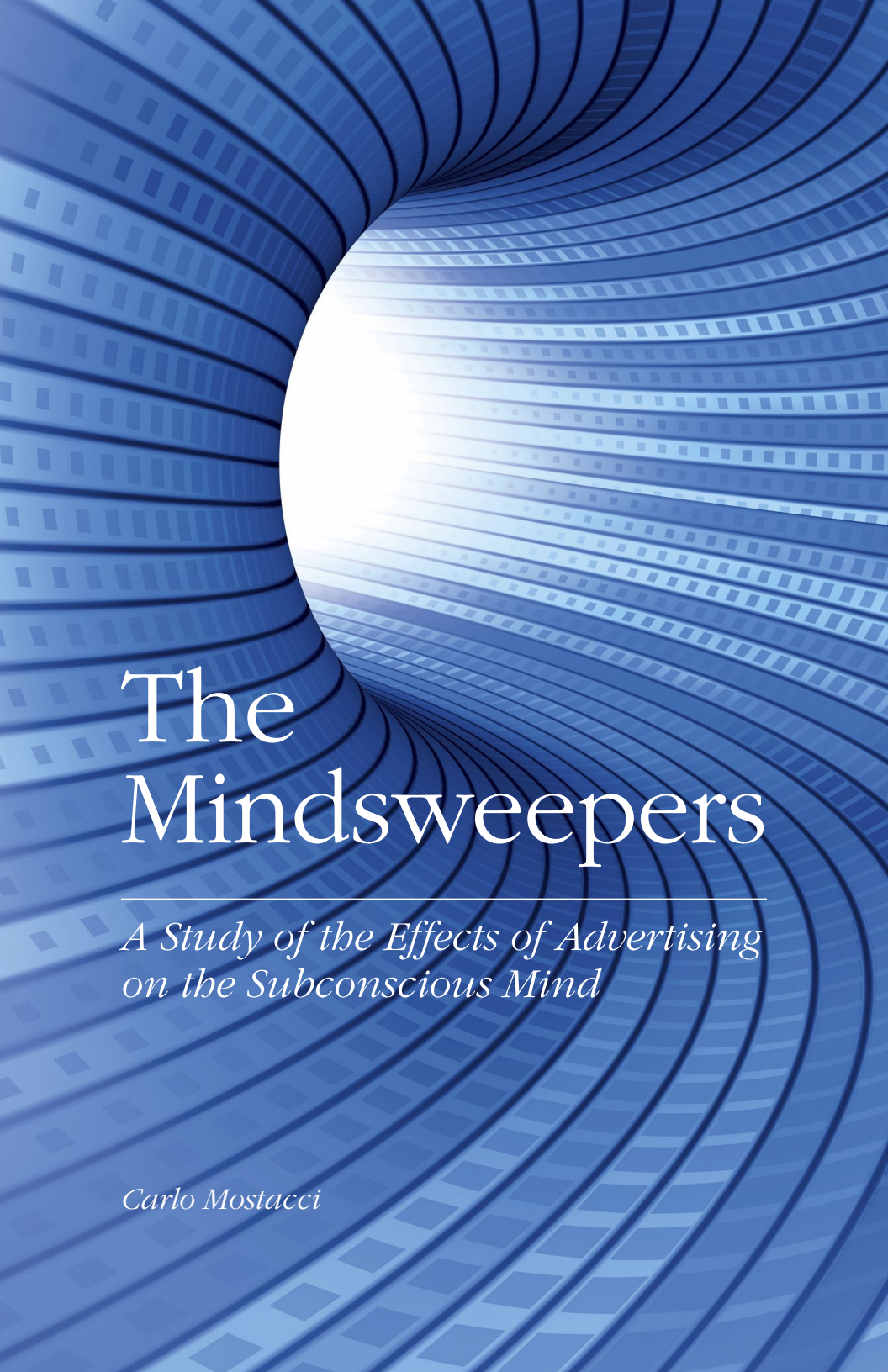
The
Mindsweepers
A Study of the Effects of Advertising
on the Subconscious Mind
Carlo Mostacci

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"I believe in the existence within myself of a power. From this belief derives my will to exert it.

The entire doctrine of *Animal Magnetism* is contained in the two words: *believe* and *want*.

I *believe* that I have the power to set into action the vital principle of my fellow men. I *want* to make use of it—this is all my science and all my means.

Believe and *want*, Sirs, and you will do as much as I."

— Marquis de Puységur, 1785

"Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it *fate*."

— Carl Jung

Table of Contents

Preface 1

Introduction 3

The Mindsweepers 4

- Animal Magnetism 4
- Human Consciousness 5
- Gustave Le Bon 8
- Ivan Pavlov 9
- Gestalt 10
- Advertising & Public Relations 11
- The Mechanism 12
- Induced Irrationality 13
- The Super-Culture 15
- A Path Forward 15

Epilogue 17

Bibliography 19

Preface

At the age of six I was diagonosed with *lazy eye*—a congenital condition clinically termed *amblyopia* which affects less than 1% of the population. Though there was nothing physically amiss with my eyes, an opthamologist informed my parents that my brain was favouring my left eye and if the situation remained untreated the optic nerve of my right eye would atrophy—eventually leaving me blind in what I began to call my *bad* eye.

Though I would never attain full sight in my *bad* eye I could however retain whatever sight that remained. Time was of the essence, so I was immediately prescribed an eyepatch which I wore over my *bad* eye. The eyepatch was to be worn at all times, thereby turning off my brain's access to my *good* eye and forcing it to recognize my *bad* eye.

I'm not sure how long I wore the eyepatch—it seemed like forever—but in the end I was delighted to know that I had actually gained a marginal improvement of eyesight in my *bad* eye, albeit I

would never focus clearly through that eye—even with prescription eyeglasses. This indelible experience made me aware of the power of the human mind and taught me this valuable lesson: the mind will involuntarily do things that it wants to, but it *can be persuaded* to do otherwise.

—CM

Introduction

The short essay you are about to read was written with the intent of educating anyone who reads newspapers, watches TV, uses the Internet and generally communicates with other members of society—I'm sure that most of us fit in here somewhere.

Although I am not a medical professional, my many years of experience in the communications industry have led me to research and uncover the underpinnings of modern advertising. In doing so I have come to this conclusion: What we consider to be an unproductive and dormant part of our psyche is the very aspect of our human selves that is being intentionally targeted via technology in a consistent and methodical manner.

I trust this essay will prompt you, the reader, to realize the existence of this subliminal mechanism and to guard yourself against its insidious nature.

The Mindsweepers

To an advertiser, the mind can be regarded as being comprised of four main processing regions: the *left hemisphere*, the *right hemisphere*, the *conscious mind* and the *subconscious mind*. These four regions continually work in harmony to help us make choices and effectively define the individuals that we are.

Animal Magnetism

As far back as the 18th century, Franz Mesmer, Abbé Faria and the Marquis de Puységur independently investigated and publicized the phenomenon they called *Animal Magnetism*. These individuals are credited with having initiated the scientific study of the human consciousness and their work paved the way for the subsequent field known today as Psychology.

With the advent of clinical psychology in the late 1800s, research into the workings of the human psyche was further defined and propagated

by the findings of James Braid, Ambrose-Auguste Liébeault, Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung. Their work has directly contributed to shaping and codifying the types of communication that people have been steadily receiving since the dawn of the 20th century.

Human Consciousness

Make no mistake—whether in the form of printed media, TV, the internet, radio, or personal discourse—modern communications owe their effectiveness to several centuries worth of dedicated research into the human consciousness. Let's briefly review some of these findings:

The *left hemisphere* controls the logical, analytical tasks and is responsible for critical reasoning. It seeks to break down spatial forms into their constituent components and essentially attempts to rationalize the decisions that we are to make. Typical critical thoughts emanating from this region could be: "Do we have the necessary funds available to make the purchase?" or "Is the purchase feasible?"

or "This decision could get me into trouble!"

The *right hemisphere* is the center of creative thought and emotional responses. It recognizes spatial forms both in continuity and in whole shapes. In a sense its tendency is to access a world of fantasy, imagination and irrationality. Emotionally inspired thoughts like, "I'm quitting my job right now!" or "I would look great in that new car!" or "I don't care how much it costs!" would stem from this part of the brain.

The *conscious mind* also referred to as the *neo-cortex*, is responsible for our direct relationship with reality. Giving us our will to do things—to be rational or irrational—it essentially coordinates the *left and right hemispheres* of thought and comes to a concluding response.

The *subconscious mind*, otherwise known as the *reptilian mind* or *limbic mind*, is responsible for our basic instincts of protection and survival. It also controls involuntary processes and initial perceptions of the physical elements within our environment. This typically underestimated part of

the brain holds our core proclivities, beliefs and biases: those personal traits that are principally a result of our respective cultural, ethnic and societal development.

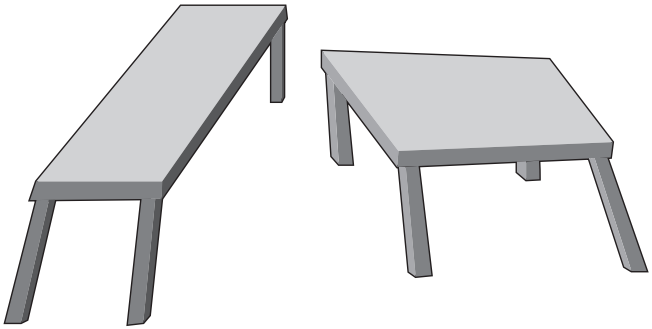
At this point you're probably saying to yourself: "Enough with the history and biology lessons! Where is this all leading?" Admittedly, this is a perfectly understandable reaction; so let me tweak your curiosity with two small examples of the *subconscious mind* and *conscious mind* at work—here's the first one:

> **The raosen you can mkae snese of tihs snectene is bscaeue yuor sbcuounscios mnid has tekan crnotol oevr yuor cinsocous mnid. I'ts as spilme as taht! Our mnids rnzcoegie whloe wrdos frsit not tiehr idindaviul ltertes. Tihs key cnopcet fmors the bsias of mnid conotrl.**

The next example features a simple drawing of two tables. At first glance it's obvious that the

tabletops look completely dissimilar—but are they?

Upon closer inspection and with the assistance of a ruler the *conscious mind* alerts us to the visual anomaly presented before our eyes.



Perhaps that little foray into your conscious and subconscious states of mind left you feeling a bit amused and maybe even somewhat perplexed—that's good—now let's proceed.

Gustave Le Bon

Gustave Le Bon, an early French psychologist realized the relationship of the s*ubconscious mind* to the concept of collective thought: the ability of

the subconscious thoughts of individuals to meld together as one cohesive thought when those individuals were assembled into a group. He found that people behaved very differently when they interacted in groups; individualism was substituted with compliance to the collective thought of the group. Consequently, when individuals formed into one whole subconscious entity, they could be more effectively persuaded into a decision.

Moreover, Le Bon realized that individuals need not be physically grouped together. His research concluded that people could be aggregated in thought alone and still experience the same collective subconscious effect; an activity that since their inception, advertising and public relations agencies have been vigorously engaged in.

Ivan Pavlov

One of Le Bon's contemporaries was Ivan Pavlov. Through his experiments with animals, this Russian physiologist discovered that repetition of an activity which itself was initiated by a stimulus would cause

that activity to be initiated *whenever the stimulus was applied*. For example, if through continuous repetition, an individual has been conditioned to recall a specific event whenever a particular chime is sounded, that individual *is always prepared to engage* in that related response whenever the stimulus of that sound is heard. Intrinsically a form of post-hypnotic suggestion, this effect works with all the human senses and the key to the whole process, as Pavlov discovered, is a *rigorous repetitive pattern of stimulus-response*.

Gestalt

In support of the research into the human psyche that was rapidly advancing in the early 1900s, German psychologists Kurt Koffka, Max Wertheimer, and Wolfgang Köhler coined the term *Gestalt* to describe a pattern of stimulus-response that occurs in all human minds when processing images and spatial forms. They found, among other things, that the *subconscious mind* would be first to react to visual information, after which the *conscious mind*

would interpret, assess and respond. *In all cases the subconscious mind always took precedence over the conscious mind*. This is the very reason you were able to read the garbled sentence presented earlier in this paper—your *subconscious mind* with support from your *right hemisphere* read it first!

Advertising & Public Relations

Was it mere coincidence that North American advertising and public relations agencies organized and made their debut in the midst of all this research into the human psyche?

Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays were two of the principal figures at that time and they successfully pioneered the application of contemporary advances made in the study of human psychology to their communications trade. Bernays in particular credited his success to the research findings of both his uncle Sigmund Freud and to those of Gustave Le Bon.

Now—if you're still with me—you might be asking, "How did these early advertising and public relations guys apply this research?"

Well, the plan was pretty much established because the route to take was already known—but it didn't happen overnight. Ever since those initial days of mass marketing, the preponderance of advertising has continued to focus primarily on two of the four processing regions of the human psyche, namely the *subconscious mind* and the *right hemisphere*. Following this protocol meant that all the processing regions of the mind would no longer handle stimuli in harmony.

By circumventing the centers of logic and critical thinking, a definite mental shift towards irrationality and fantasy was attained—the ideal conditions for advertising.

The Mechanism

The sustained over-stimulation of the *subconscious mind* and of the *right hemisphere* gradually facilitates and promotes emotional, creative and irrational responses. Conversely, a side effect of this specific over-stimulation is an eventual hindrance to the cognitive processes of both the *left hemisphere* and

the *conscious mind*. In other words: by consistently over-stimulating the emotional and irrational processing regions of our minds, the opposing regions of rational and critical thinking eventually weaken. Perhaps you may have heard this psychological process referred to as the term *dumbing down*?

In fact, through the constant repetition of images, concepts, and ideas, which exploit our fears and insecurities, the targeted *subconscious mind* begins to change as it substitutes or assumes new tendencies, biases and prejudices. This effect is positively reinforced when people who likewise have had their subconscious identically influenced, form into groups, interrelate and advance a more compelling collective consciousness.

Induced Irrationality

Nowadays, media communications are saturated with special video effects and sound bites laced with hyperboles—specially designed to inundate the *right hemisphere* of our brains. By virtue of positive reinforcement, our minds have been

collectively conditioned to routinely accept an onslaught of new technologies in the forms of video games, virtual reality devices and interactive software. The highly specific electronic stimuli of these evolving technologies enable the recipient to more readily enter into the fantasy world of their *right hemisphere*. Through ceaseless streams of stimuli, this fantasy world slowly and insidiously blends itself with reality and self-propagates via induced irrationality. Critical and logical responses, which would normally balance this mental shift, are misled by an intentionally under-stimulated *left hemisphere*.

Ultimately, as a consequence of this dual-pronged assault on their minds, people generally end up thinking alike, as they gradually migrate towards common beliefs and deliver predictable responses to any given stimulus. The stimulus may seemingly be interpreted as a trigger to subconsciously buy something, but I'm sure you're beginning to realize that it could involve more—*much more*.

The Super-Culture

In essence, as a direct consequence of an endless succession of emerging technologies, we are quickly transforming into a *super-culture*: a culture whose citizens have compromised their individuality for group ideals, group concepts and group beliefs.

Ironically, a disturbing symptom of this accelerated transformation is that we're also methodically turning into automatons: virtual entities in human form that neither realize, nor care to respect, what is happening to our *internal* thoughts. Indeed, humanity has now reached a point where the line separating reality from fantasy has effectively been blurred.

A Path Forward

"How has this happened and what can we do?" you ask. Well, at the end of the day, and after all is said and done, we find ourselves in this unsettling position because contrary to popular belief, our *subconscious minds are not sleeping*—they're wide-awake and we're allowing someone else to tell them how and what to think. Thankfully it's never

too late to take control and remedy the situation. Considering that awareness of a problem is halfway towards finding its solution, let's take a giant *first step* towards that solution by simply *respecting our subconscious minds*.

The next step *is up to you*.

Epilogue

Advertising is everywhere—there aren't too many places in our world where it's missing. From the labels that adorn our toothpaste tubes to the massive LED displays that hang high above our shopping plazas, Advertising caresses our emotions like a seductive lover, abruptly brings us to attention like a vigilant parent, and nurtures our wisdom like the most erudite of teachers.

It may be argued that without Advertising a citizen of today's fast-paced, ever-changing, multi-tasking global society couldn't possibly keep abreast of the capricious trends in politics, finance, fashion, entertainment and technology. In short, Advertising defines our personalities and is the bonding agent of humanity—without it most of us would feel lost in an *individuated* personal oblivion.

As such, we give Advertising all the privileges and authority it demands—no subject matter is too risqué, no condition is truly absolute, no belief is sacred, and no traditions hinder its proliferation. Given

its free reign, is it any wonder that Advertising has now become the foremost addictive panacea of the masses?

However, dependency brings about its own inherent dangers as any addict will assert. The essay you have just read has introduced you to a hidden mechanism of modern communication and hinted at its intrinsic potential. This mechanism can only be scrutinized by an informed and alert society. Some of you may be asking yourselves: "Why should we be concerned?" Permit me then to answer and conclude with this premise: Advertising taken to its extreme becomes Propaganda, and history proves that *unrestrained* Propaganda soon manifests itself as humanity's worst nightmare.

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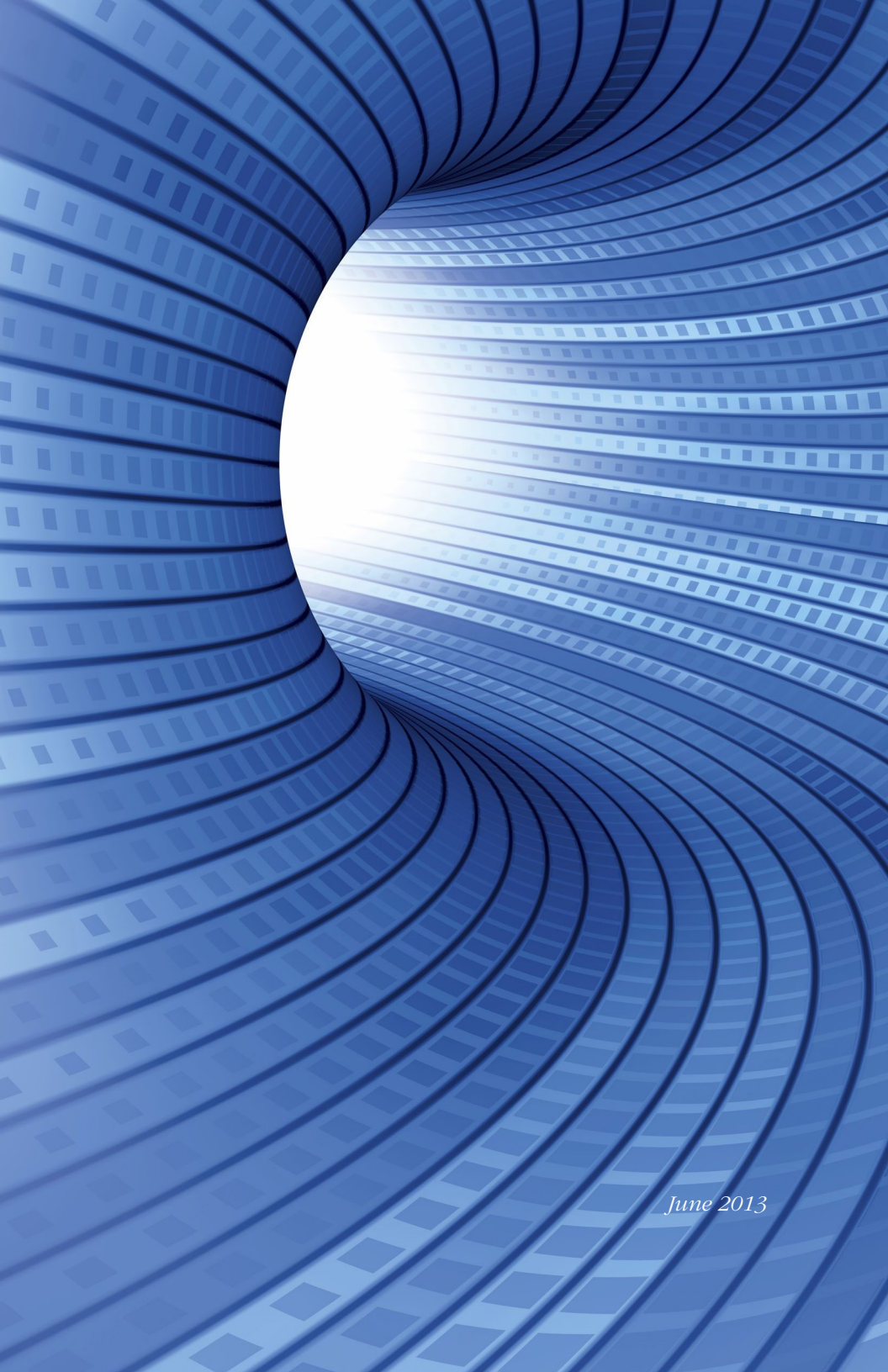

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